

The Marrow of Tradition centers upon a plot crafted by Major Carteret, General Belmont, and Captain George McBane to seize control of the city and cast off “nigger domination.” Carteret and Belmont are white patricians who wish to resume control over Wellington. McBane, the son of an overseer and himself once a member of the Ku Klux Klan, exemplifies the unrefined New Southerner whose social standing is determined by wealth rather than birth. Chesnutt’s triumvirate criticize the bi-racial government, claiming that African Americans are unfit for politics. Carteret’s editorials espouse the same rhetoric that the Democrats injected into the 1898 election. The title of the novel refers to the anachronistic rhetoric of white supremacy that continued to persist in the South. These men employ this rhetoric to stir racial hatred in Wellington.

As scholar Stephen Knadler noted, Chesnutt illustrated that whiteness was “a performance mandated at particular historical moments for its political advantageousness and its suppression of other group identities such as class or ethnicity.” In order to expose the fiction of race, Chesnutt offers the example of Jerry, Carteret’s black porter, who sits outside the editor’s office and mimics the talk of “Angry Saxons” and expresses his desire to be white. Jerry even purchases a kit that promises to turn an African-American into an Anglo-American. Although Jerry’s racial conversion fails, the conversation that Jerry mimics reveals that whiteness must be claimed; if whiteness was a natural state, these declarations would be superfluous.²⁵

Chesnutt deflects claims of black criminality, one of the main components of the white supremacy rhetoric, back onto whites with the murder of Polly Ochiltree, Olivia Carteret’s aunt. Tom Delamere, grandson of old Mr. Delamere, the aging aristocrat, robs Ochiltree to pay off a gambling debt. Disguised as his grandfather’s faithful servant Sandy Campbell, Tom scares the woman, and she collapses and suffers a fatal blow to the head. Tom leaves a trail of evidence leading back to Campbell. A special edition of Carteret’s newspaper implies that the culprit also raped Ochiltree, which encourages white men to form a lynch mob to execute their own brand of justice.²⁶ Miller brings the elder Delamere to defend his servant from a lynch mob. When the truth is discovered, Delamere urges Carteret to publish the information in order to save Sandy’s life. Carteret instead concocts a story about an unknown black man who committed the crime and fled the city, perpetuating local fears of a burly black brute preying on white women.²⁷

When this plot unfolds and the white mob terrorizes the black community, Miller refuses to join the defensive force led by Josh Green, a poor black who speaks in the same dialect as the black characters of Chesnutt’s earlier short stories. Miller contends that he may be of more use to his people in life than in martyrdom, yet in Miller, Chesnutt notes “a distinct feeling of shame and envy that he, too, did not feel impelled to throw away his life in a hopeless struggle.”²⁸ Green’s decision, motivated in part by the opportunity to exact revenge upon McBane for killing his father, leads to his death. Echoing Fulton’s question regarding the fate of Dan Wright,

²⁵ Charles W. Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, 1901; reprinted Penguin Books, 1993), pg. 31, 90; Chesnutt, “Chesnutt’s Own View,” pg. 872; McWilliams, *Fictions of Race*, pg. 153; Knadler, “Untragic Mulatto,” pg. 434. For a discussion of the consumption of race, see Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998).

²⁶ Chesnutt, *Marrow of Tradition*, pg. 190.

²⁷ Wilson, *Whiteness*, pg. 132-133.

²⁸ Chesnutt, *Marrow of Tradition*, pg. 282, 285.